

April 4, 1973

Dr. Lawrence K. Altman  
Medical News  
New York Times  
New York, New York 10036

Dear Dr. Altman,

I was pleased to "meet" you again in the pages of Hippocrates Revisited. (This gives me a chance to express my admiration for your work as a journalist.)

Two point in re your article.

(1) Are you acquainted with J.B.S. Haldane's self-experimentation? Clark's biography goes into some of this (Chapter 7). I wish I could fetch some references to his writings about it. His essays of the mid 40's surely say something. Perhaps Helen Spurway (who now lives in India) or his other colleagues could contribute.

(2) I think there are hazards in the viewpoint you quote from Wells. Many a general has risked his own life in pursuit of glory, and has perhaps felt justified then in disposing of the lives of others. There is a danger that in suggesting that willingness to self-experiment be a necessary condition, it may become accepted as sufficient. In fact, that willingness is totally irrelevant to most situations in clinical experimentation, and may even distract attention from the basic moral issues.

Of course, there are circumstances of such hazard that no one else should be induced to volunteer. But what besides the expectation of "glory" then distinguishes the experimenter as a more appropriate subject than other properly informed volunteers. And will that kind of preoccupation with "glory" lead to the most careful work? Most responsible men in publicly sanctioned roles are likely to be even more meticulous about the lives of others than with their own.

I am not decrying the heroism of many men in special situations -- that meticulous care I just mentioned might frustrate some experiments, and it will then be more "convenient" to self-experiment. I do not see how the Wellsian paradigm will really improve the ethical or technical quality either of medical research or of strategic decision making.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor 66 Genetics

JL/rr

ALTMAN, Lawrence